

An immense maternal presence

Today Pope Benedict XVI is visiting Lourdes, to mark the 150th anniversary of the apparitions of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette Soubirous. An academic who initially felt uncomfortable about visiting the shrine here writes about its extraordinary power

The *Observer* recently carried a front-page photograph of Ingrid Betancourt in Lourdes. After six years of captivity in Colombia, she had gone to give thanks to the Virgin Mary for her release, and to pray for the release of other hostages. The image must have bemused the newspaper's largely secular, liberal readership, this juxtaposition of a hero of modern democracy and a religious observance many would brand as superstitious ignorance.

The shrine at Lourdes can undoubtedly be a place of religious credulity, and during the last 150 years it has often served as a bastion of Catholic resistance to the modernisation of European politics and culture. But, in an era when the forces of rationalisation and competitive individualism increasingly dominate our Western societies, Lourdes also represents a different order of things. For the millions who go there, it is a place of hope where suffering takes on new meanings – not as an enemy to be conquered but as part of the mystery of life.

Lourdes is a place where the sick and the suffering take centre stage, and the rest of us are there as helpers and bystanders, or as pilgrims who know that a healthy body can still suffer psychological torments that cry out for healing and peace. The World Health Or-

ganisation estimates that by 2020 depression will be the leading cause of ill health in the Western world. As our bodies benefit from ever more care and attention, it seems our spirits are withering from neglect.

Yet to romanticise Lourdes as a place of holiness and healing would be as simplistic as to write it off as a place of superstition and mumbo-jumbo, for it can be both and neither. The Catholic anthropologist Victor Turner developed the concept of "liminality" to describe rituals and life-changing experiences that have a transformative effect on us. These are times when the rules that structure our daily lives are suspended, so that we are able to enter into states of consciousness, relationships and ways of expressing ourselves which are outside our expectations. I think the phenomenon of Lourdes can be at least partly explained by the fact that it is a place where there is a profound sense of liminality, a breaching of many of the boundaries that define us, so that the imagination is kindled into new ways of seeing and understanding.

I had to overcome considerable resistance to make my first visit to Lourdes. Despite having spent much of my academic life studying Marian theology, as a convert from Presbyterianism I was wary of what I used to see as the tackier, wackier side of Catholic devotion

to Mary. However, in 2007 we decided at Roehampton University where I work to join the annual Pilgrimage Trust (HCPT) pilgrimage to Lourdes, and I agreed to go in the guise of a lecturer taking students on a field trip. This allowed me to take refuge in a certain critical objectivity if I needed to. After a couple of days, I began to experience that sense of liminality. As social boundaries between students and teachers dissolved (helped by the cocktails we shared in the evenings), I came to know some of their personal stories – each with its own narrative of struggle and hope. There had been no selection process, although one might have thought we'd hand-picked our group to ensure the widest possible representation of religion, age, ethnicity and lifestyle. The evangelicals were disturbed by the candlelit procession with Mary carried on an illuminated float, but from a Hindu perspective it was a familiar ritual.

The sense of liminality begins perhaps with Bernadette herself, a romantic myth even before she was dead. But the story of Bernadette Soubirous is one of almost unbearable poignancy. She was a sickly child from a desperately poor family – at the time of the apparitions, she was living with her parents and four surviving siblings in a disused prison cell. In February 1858, the 14-year-old girl went

'Lourdes teaches us that we are all equal in God's eyes'

I returned to Lourdes this summer, on my
eighth pilgrimage since 2000 with the Order
of Malta Volunteers (OMV) – the British youth
offshoot of the Knights of Malta, writes George
Norton. Only once did I miss the annual pil-
grimage; in 2006, when I was undergoing
treatment for acute leukaemia.

While I had always prayed for the hospi-
tal pilgrims (HPs) – the OMV takes around
50 people with various illnesses and disabili-
ties, caring for them all day every day for the
week – and for God to help friends and rel-
atives who were ill, this time I was on the re-
ceiving end. The love and support I felt when
I met the pilgrims on their return was over-
whelming – in a place of such healing spiri-

tuality both helpers and HPs had been caring about me as I underwent radiotherapy.

I had already discovered in my previous years as a helper the power of caring for others, and the ability of Lourdes to make me think beyond myself to focus on others had strengthened my faith in God. Lourdes teaches us that we are all equal in his eyes, as the HPs are given the attention they sometimes lack back in Britain. In helping to ensure that the HPs' week with the OMV is a happy one, I have always felt I am performing God's will. For many of the HPs, every day can be a frustrating struggle to communicate or to perform the simplest tasks, but their courage in accepting their burden with

a smile was an important inspiration to me when I had cancer. I accepted my diagnosis as part of God's plan for me, and continued to look for the joy in life, praying not for God's healing but for his help in learning to accept my illness and the potential consequences.

Lourdes has always been associated with miracles, but the miracles performed in Lourdes every day go beyond medical cures. On my second pilgrimage, in 2001, I had prayed for God to cure my mother of ovarian cancer. But after she died in 2002, I prayed with my younger brother under the serene gaze of the statue of Our Lady for help in accepting her death. Her cancer had not been healed. With our hearts and souls opened to

to gather firewood with her sisters at the grotto of Massabielle, where she had the first of 18 encounters with an apparition she referred to as “l’Aquoero”, roughly translated as “that thing”, which she described as a small and beautiful young lady. During the sixteenth apparition, on the Feast of the Annunciation (25 March), the lady identified herself, saying in the local dialect, “*Que soy era immaculada concepciou*”. Although the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception had been promulgated four years earlier by Pope Pius IX, it was unlikely that an uneducated peasant girl would have known about it, so this was widely interpreted as affirmation of the doctrine. The story of Bernadette is a story of the forsaken and the outcast, a reminder that, even as Europe surged into the modern world, children starved and scavenged for firewood.

The sense of liminality also derives from the geographical positioning of Lourdes. It is a place of intense human activity – apart from Paris, it has the highest number of hotel rooms of any town in France, and it is notorious for its souvenir shops selling every kind of kitsch and tat. Yet it is cupped among the Pyrenees, washed around by a towering landscape of snow-covered peaks where all our human bustle is dwarfed by the majesty of creation. The liminal, then, also refers to that experience of standing among mountains and feeling one’s humanity displaced or called into question by the mystery of the cosmos.

But perhaps liminality refers most directly to the spirituality of Lourdes, for that is the most enigmatic and compelling aspect of the shrine. According to Bernadette, the apparition asked for a church to be built, and today a vast basilica rises above the shrine, visible testimony to the wealth and power of the institutional Church. Yet the spiritual life of Lourdes is focused on the grotto and its surroundings beneath the basilica, and this topography acts as a metaphor for the relationship between the religious institution and the powerful undercurrent of faith that it can never fully control. The rocks around the grotto have been worn smooth by the touch of millions of hands, and there is a sense of something visceral, pagan even, about the way in which Catholic

devotions and prayers melt and mingle with the noumenal mystery of a God both veiled and revealed in earth, wind and fire, in rocky wildernesses and the untameable persistence of nature in the face of all our civilising and controlling impulses. Surely, an incarnational faith is one which situates itself in such a space of encounter between the sublime and the ridiculous – between the inscrutable



majesty of God, and the often foolish muddle of our human devotions.

The water that gurgles up from the spring is distributed through rows of standpipes where pilgrims fill plastic bottles emblazoned with blue Madonnas. Beyond the grotto, candles burn and drip through the night until, in the small hours, men come to clean out the stalls, like figures from Blake’s dark satanic mills. All night, there are pilgrims at the grotto, their murmured prayers dissolving in the wax-scented air. And then there are the baths.

It was a stormy afternoon when I joined the queue for the baths on the women’s side with some of my students. For two hours, I felt a growing sense of apprehension as we shuffled down the benches towards the front. Sitting beneath a concrete vault, with plastic curtains concealing what went on on the other side, a student put into words what I’d been afraid to articulate, even to myself: “This feels like

a concentration camp,” she said. The rain came down in a torrent, and I asked myself, if I was so keen to plunge into holy water, why not just run out and turn my face to the sky?

Eventually, our turn came. A woman held a blue cape around me as I undressed. I was led into the small cubicle with its sunken bath and supported between two women who wrapped a cold, wet sheet around me and guided me down the steps into the biting cold water to kiss the statue of Mary at the end. They murmured prayers and held my arms as I immersed myself in the water. Still wet, I wriggled back into my clothes, and it was over. I felt clean, new, tearful and grateful. What I had found behind the curtain was gentleness, a sense of an immense motherly presence. I find it hard to express why the comment about the concentration camp is so significant to that experience – it has something to do with the humanity we encounter when we step into the unknown and put ourselves at the mercy of others, and about the knowledge that that can be an experience of the most devastating betrayal, or of the most profound compassion.

This year, I worked as a volunteer for an afternoon at the baths. It felt like taking part in a carefully choreographed ballet, as we coordinated our movements to ensure that the woman going through the water was held and comforted, that her dignity was assured and her prayers were assisted. I had a sense of the world’s women flowing through my hands, so much vulnerability, so much diversity, so much trust. I heard no prayers for miraculous healings. I just heard wave upon wave of prayers for support, for courage, for understanding, for loved ones, for children, for husbands, for hope. Again, I had that sense of an immense maternal presence, holding, consoling, being there for all of us.

Afterwards, as we were putting on our outdoor clothes, I spoke to the woman I’d been on duty with. I asked her what parish she came from in the UK. She smiled. “I don’t have a parish. I’m a Muslim,” she said. She had visited Lourdes when her son was ill, and she had been going back ever since. She explained that Mary is honoured by Muslims, and she had no difficulty taking part in the ritual of the baths. Liminality can create spaces of human encounter and recognition by which we see beyond the confines of our daily lives, and discover different ways of being together across the boundaries.

There is something miraculous about Lourdes, attributable not to the suspension of the laws of nature, but to something more intangible – the suspension of the laws of division, cynicism, expediency and exclusion which structure our modern world. To say this is not to say that Lourdes is perfect. It’s not. It’s human. Maybe that’s what the advocates of ruthless scientific rationalism hate most of all – not the God bit, but the unruly muddle of the human condition with all its hopeful, prayerful affirmations of abundant, foolish, uncontrollable life.

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God by the stirring spirituality of Lourdes, the miracle lay in the healing of the pain my brother and I felt from her absence.

The friendships built in Lourdes tend to be profound and intense, and the care between HPs and helpers works both ways. Fiona Looney, who has been going to Lourdes with the OMV for around 15 years since she was 18, bought me a rosary in Lourdes that is now one of my most valued possessions. Fiona suffers from “the moderate end of severe” cerebral palsy, and explains why she returns to Lourdes in one word: “Family.”

“At the Blessing of the Hands, I looked around, and it struck me how many people I had stories with in that room,” explains Fiona. “How many people [with whom] the hug would be a little bit tighter, how many people whose smiles would be a little bit wider.”

Chatting to first-timers in Lourdes, the highlights of their pilgrimages were the rewards of working with HPs, whose strength and patience humbled the helpers. “Lourdes is not a place, it’s an experience. More people should go to see the love and care exchanged,” says Maria Jepps, who came to Lourdes as an HP for the second time this summer, after a transforming experience in 2007.

It is never easy to explain what makes Lourdes so special. Every year, as I sit in front of the grotto, with the candles burning and the river flowing behind me, I think about what the people and the place have taught me, bringing me closer to God. I finished my treatment earlier this year, but I know that whatever life brings me, I will find peace there.